



Disabled Students' Commission Annual Report 2021-2022

Enhancing the disabled student experience

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Report authored by the Disabled Students' Commission

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Foreword

I am delighted to introduce the second annual report from the Disabled Students' Commission (DSC). This has been a year when the higher education sector has become more accustomed to working and studying within the context of restrictions on movement, on being able to be together and in learning processes. This has not been easy for anyone and least of all for disabled students.

Many organisations have been major supporters of the DSC and I would like to thank UCAS, Disabled Students UK, National Union of Students, Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services, Jisc, Student Loans Company, Office of the Independent Adjudicator, Health Education England, National Association of Disability Practitioners and Quality Assurance Agency for all the support that they have provided to the DSC during the year. A particular thanks on this occasion though to Nicola Dandridge as she leaves her role as Chief Executive of the Office for Students after significant service to the sector as formerly Chief Executive of the Equality Challenge Unit and then UUK. Nicola has been a passionate champion of inclusivity and has always supported the work of the DSC.

We also welcome John Blake as a new Commissioner replacing Chris Millward as Director for Fair Access and Participation at the Office for Students, and we would like to place on the record our thanks to Chris for being instrumental in enabling the Commission to make the progress it has.

This year we have noted the many challenges that have been faced as we have listened to students and researched the disabled student voice, thank you to all those students who gave us so much of their time. It is clear from that feedback that the sector has consolidated its approach during this period and that disabled students deserve and require much more specific attention. There are also many fantastic examples of great practice, and we need to build on those.

Looking forward to 2022-2023, the DSC's agenda will change from supporting disabled students through a period of great difficulty to one that will seek to place at the door of the sector and policy makers a more radical position in which the needs and interests of disabled students are at the top of the agenda.

From our research, disabled students have told us that they require:

- + communication
- + consistency
- + choice
- + certainty.

We think they also need coherence and that is why we will be laying down a blueprint to make the step-change that is required.

Thank you for supporting the DSC.

Geoff Layer, Chair of the Disabled Students' Commission

1. About the Disabled Students' Commission

The Disabled Students' Commission (DSC) is an independent and strategic group with a key priority to advise, inform and influence English higher education providers (HEPs) and sector bodies to improve support for disabled students. Its aim is to help the sector achieve more positive outcomes for disabled students in relation to access, participation, success and progression.

The creation of the DSC was announced in June 2019 by former Universities Minister Chris Skidmore, and established in March 2020. It is funded by the Office for Students (OfS), and is supported by a secretariat provided by Advance HE for a period of three years.

The DSC will challenge, influence and support the Department for Education (DfE), the OfS, HEPs and other relevant sector organisations to accelerate the pace of change in creating inclusive learning and living environments for disabled students across the student lifecycle.

The Commissioners were appointed through a public appointments process ran by the OfS, which comprises:

- + Geoff Layer - Chair of the Disabled Students' Commission
- + Susan Daniels (Commissioner) – Chief Executive, National Deaf Children's Society
- + Sarah Greer (Commissioner) – Vice-Chancellor, University of Winchester
- + Patrick Johnson (Commissioner) – Director of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, University of Law
- + Deborah Johnston (Commissioner) – Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education), London South Bank University
- + Piers Wilkinson (Student Voice Commissioner) – Disability Adviser and Consultant
- + Sean Cullen (Student Voice Commissioner) – Doctoral researcher, Brunel University
- + Dr Sam Parrett (Further Education Adviser) – CEO, London and South East Education Group

John Blake, Director for Fair Access and Participation at the OfS was recently nominated as a Commissioner and joined in February 2022. He succeeds Chris Millward, previous Director for Fair Access and Participation at the OfS and DSC Commissioner, who left his post in December 2022.

Further information about the DSC, its Terms of Reference and its work to date can be found on the DSC's campaign page [here](#).

2. Introduction

2.1 The DSC's role in enhancing the disabled student experience

During the period of March 2021 to March 2022, the DSC has continued in its role to challenge, inform and advise the higher education (HE) sector to accelerate the pace of change in relation to support for disabled students, as well as working with HE sector organisations, interest groups and individual HEPs to remove barriers to learning. We are confident that, since the publication of our last annual report (DSC, 2021) we have succeeded in meeting many of our goals to drive the changes that are needed. Within last year's report, we committed to focus on:

- + promoting a more proactive guidance framework for disabled applicants to higher education
- + researching the experience of students through the pandemic
- + working with HEPs, Advance HE and Jisc to enhance blended learning for disabled students
- + focusing on the changing employability needs of disabled students and graduates in the new world
- + working with the Student Loans Company (SLC) and others to promote ease of access to the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA).

In Section 3 of this report we outline our achievements over the past year, many of which demonstrate progress in direct correlation with the above areas of focus. Firstly, however, we would like to provide detail as to how we went about achieving change.

In the first year of the DSC's inception, the Commissioners decided to organise and prioritise its work-plan to follow the student lifecycle, enhancing the disabled student experience all the way from the transition from school or college, throughout HE and then to enter postgraduate study or employment. However, due to the unprecedented circumstances presented by the pandemic since its onset in March 2020, this meant that the DSC was required to shift its attention to focus on the immediate challenges impacting on the disabled student experience.

Following the publication of our first annual report, we recognise that while Covid-19 continues to underscore our work and exacerbate inequalities, it was important to return to the original lifecycle model proposed. Therefore, since March 2021, each of our quarterly meetings¹ have focused on a different milestone in the student journey. Unchanged from last year, it was agreed that while there is still a clear degree awarding gap² between disabled and non-disabled students, emphasis would be placed on improving and enhancing the disabled student experience which in itself should lead to a narrowing of that gap. As reported in the OfS' Access and Participation Data³, in 2020-21, there was a difference of 1.1 percentage points between the proportion of disabled and non-disabled students getting a first or 2:1. While the gap has decreased by 3.4 percentage points between 2010-11 and 2020-21, there is still work to do.

To help achieve aims outlined in the DSC's work plan (Appendix 2), the DSC has continued to work collaboratively with sector organisations and interest groups to influence change. With each Commissioner assigned as a 'link', regular bilateral meetings have taken place which have enabled the DSC to (i) develop an overarching view of the types of activity and good practice taking place in the sector to support disabled students, (ii) understand where the priority gaps are and, (iii) influence change accordingly. To support change-making, the DSC has built and nurtured the following relationships:

- + working with Student Loans Company (SLC) investigating barriers to Disabled Students' Allowance and the delays to getting support in place
- + working with OfS to enhance disabled student support, and to hold HEPs accountable for their progress
- + working with National Association of Disability Practitioners (NADP), Jisc, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), Office of the Independent Adjudicator for HE (OIA), Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS), Universities UK (UUK) and GuildHE on challenges facing the sector
- + working with interest groups and grassroots organisations working directly with disabled students including National Union of Students (NUS), Disabled Students UK (DSUK) and third sector organisations focused on individual impairment types

¹ The DSC meets on a quarterly basis in March, June, September and December each year. One out of four meetings were conducted face-to-face, while the remainder were remote.

² The degree awarding gap refers to the difference in the proportion of one group receiving a first/2:1 compared with another group.

³ www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/measures-of-our-success/participation-performance-measures/gap-in-degree-outcomes-1sts-or-21s-between-disabled-students-and-non-disabled-students/

- + working with Health Education England (HEE) exploring issues facing disabled health learners transitioning into the medical workforce.

There are always sector organisations with whom we have not yet had the chance to build relationships, and in our final year we would particularly like to collaborate with UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and Research England, focusing in particular on the needs of postgraduate disabled students.

We have continued to consult and listen to diverse voices across the sector while at the same time eliciting the views and feedback of disabled students to inform our recommendations. Over the past year, we have utilised the following methods to capture insight:

- + sector roundtables gathering feedback from disabled students, practitioners, experts, sector body representatives, senior leaders as well as those leading and implementing HEP policy to support disabled applicants, students and recent graduates
- + feedback from student bodies and grassroots organisations working directly with disabled students
- + reviewing feedback within reports published by other sector bodies and organisations
- + primary research with disabled students including surveys and online focus groups.

Finally, Geoff Layer, Chair of the DSC, took on the role of Disability and Access Ambassador for the university sector through the Cabinet Office and working with the Minister for Disabled People. This has enabled the DSC to seek to influence outside of HE which is particularly important in respect of transitioning into employment. The DSC also continues to have impact at the ministerial level by reporting to the Universities Minister, briefing on issues relating to:

- + the disabled student experience
- + a national framework for Information, Advice and Guidance
- + preparation for employment
- + guidance on applying to HE

Section 4 of this report outlines how we intend to further develop some of the relationships and activities outlined above, as well as identifying areas of priority for the DSC where we hope to catalyse the step-change that is required.

3. How have we made an impact?

Since the publication of our first annual report, the DSC has successfully mobilised its knowledge in a number of ways to influence change and make a positive impact for disabled students across the student lifecycle. In light of ongoing Covid-19 restrictions, the DSC has continued to work on a predominantly remote basis with the sector organisations and interest groups that are instrumental in transforming the experience of disabled students in higher education. Crucially, we have continued to make space to listen, learn and reflect on the views and feedback of disabled students studying at all levels and ensure the student voice remains at the centre of our work.

Bringing to the fore the evidential impact of our work across the sector, this section of the report outlines some of the key achievements we are particularly proud of and the way in which they have brought about positive change for disabled students. In particular, we explore how our work has helped to promote and embed effective practice in all corners of higher education.

3.1 The DSC worked with QAA to support inclusivity, accessibility and anticipatory approaches in Subject Benchmark Statements

QAA leads the development of Subject Benchmark Statements (SBSs). The statements are reviewed on a cyclical basis to ensure they are as useful as possible for discipline communities and can inform a range of purposes across the sector, including course design and providing support for securing academic standards.⁵

Since their first publication over twenty years ago, SBSs have been essential reference points for the design, delivery and review of academic programmes. Written by a subject specialist, an SBS provides general guidance on the nature of the study, as well as benchmark academic standards expected of graduates in the subject area. They are not meant to be prescriptive, instead they should allow for flexibility and innovation.

To harness this flexibility and innovation, and at the same time tackle some of the frequently occurring issues relating to equality, accessibility and inclusion, QAA partnered with the DSC to conduct a detailed review of the SBSs in their latest round of consultation, to further shape the drafts prior to their final publication in March 2022.

Upon review of the 15 statements, the DSC highlighted areas of commonality where attention/change was required relating to (i) language, (ii) recognition of need for reasonable adjustments, (iii) ethos and intention, and (iv) potential discrimination. Detailed feedback was provided to the advisory groups reviewing the draft statements in the first instance, upon which both QAA and the DSC agreed that a dedicated framework would be beneficial moving forward.

As a result, the DSC developed a comprehensive **Framework for Advisory Groups on Disabled Student Inclusion**, to be used for upcoming review cycles. The framework encourages advisory groups to consider disabled students' requirements across all aspects of a course, and to return to the original ethos of flexibility and innovation; considering the degree to which subject-specific flexibility can be anticipated in teaching, learning and assessment activities.

Our fervent hope is that future iterations of statements will adopt the key principles of the framework, in such a way that the need for post-hoc implementation of reasonable adjustments for disabled students can be avoided.

⁵ See www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/subject-benchmark-statements

3.2 Guidance published by the Disabled Students' Commission has been used in University settings

The DSC's guidance, Considerations for disabled applicants to higher or degree apprenticeships (2021) was intended to help disabled apprenticeship candidates navigate the support for reasonable adjustments provided by both their employer and their learning provider, and encouraged applicants to ask questions about the learning element of their apprenticeship. The guidance has been viewed on the DSC's campaign page over 500 times.

Research conducted in 2020 by training company Cognassist⁶ highlights some of the challenges experienced by those on higher or degree apprenticeships. It noted that around 15% of learners are currently dropping out of their apprenticeship programmes because their requirements are not identified upfront, and the right support is not properly applied for and allocated. It also reported that many individuals did not disclose their disability or additional learning requirements because they felt embarrassed or scared to share this information. This sense of stigma was prevalent across certain subject areas, for example apprentices working in and studying construction were least likely to consider themselves as requiring additional support.

So far, the guidance has been recognised by a leading law firm known for its positive impact across business and society.⁷ Acknowledging that disability support for disabled students on higher or degree apprenticeships is often complex due to uncertainties over the respective roles and legal responsibilities of HEPs, employers, and confusion about the funding available to students for adjustments, the law firm believe the guidance will help demystify the process – especially when higher and degree apprenticeships are likely to become an important element of the Government's focus on flexible learning and skills enhancement.

It is therefore positive and timely that HEPs have begun to translate the guidance to be used in their own settings. London South Bank University (LSBU) is a recent example, a university noted for its apprenticeship offering across a wide range of sectors and representing hundreds of different job roles. To improve information, advice and guidance around the provision of support for LSBU's disabled applicants applying to study on apprenticeship programmes, the Apprenticeship team translated the DSC guidance, making it available for all students and staff to read and giving disabled applicants the assurance and confidence their requirements will be met throughout an apprenticeship.

⁶ See www.fenews.co.uk/skills/new-study-reveals-alarming-numbers-of-apprentices-with-hidden-learning-difficulties/

⁷ See www.brownejacobson.com/education/training-and-resources/legal-updates/2021/10/supporting-disabled-applicants-to-higher-or-degree-apprenticeships

3.3 Access and Participation plans acknowledged recommendations in Three Months to Make a Difference

At the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the government identified vulnerable groups of students who would need particular support during this period, which included disabled students.⁸ Recognising this vulnerability, our publication, Three Months to Make a Difference (2020) outlined seven urgent recommendations for HEPs to consider in their Covid-19 planning ahead of the new academic year. The key areas of challenge for HEPs and policy makers to address were to:

- + provide disabled applicants with support and guidance that is reflective of the Covid-19 pandemic in the clearing process
- + ensure ease of access to funding for individual level reasonable adjustments
- + ensure student support meets and considers the requirements of disabled students during the pandemic
- + consider disabled students when making university campuses and accommodation Covid-19 secure
- + facilitate disabled students' participation in welcome and induction weeks and ongoing social activities
- + ensure blended learning is delivered inclusively and its benefits are considered in long-term planning
- + embed accessibility as standard across all learning platforms and technologies.

Although it would be difficult to trace the journey from our recommendations to changes implemented within individual HEPs, we do know to what extent recommendations have been adopted at a summary level based on responses provided in the OfS' latest monitoring outcomes report for 2019-20 (2021). For this report, providers were asked to provide information about whether they had adopted the recommendations in Three Months to Make a Difference.

Results highlighted that a number of providers took steps to ensure blended learning was delivered inclusively, including providing learning materials in advance, and adopting both synchronous and asynchronous learning as options for students. The report also highlighted some gaps in provision, for example only a handful of providers reported the use of interpreters.

The DSC has successfully leveraged some of these gaps as points for further investigation and points of action, including exploring the above issue in our roundtable on the provision of automated captioning in higher education.

⁸ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/coronavirus/provider-guide-to-coronavirus/provider-faq/

3.4 Our research uncovered some of the key areas of challenge facing disabled students during Covid-19

A key responsibility of the DSC is to develop high quality evidence to challenge and inform sector and provider practice. Good evidence is underpinned by an understanding of the lived experience of those you are seeking to support, and so capturing the disabled student voice through the use of research was an essential consideration.

While the DSC was waiting to understand to what extent recommendations in Three Months to Make a Difference (2020) had been actioned in the months that followed its publication, it was clear that the pandemic was continuing to exacerbate existing inequalities and disabled students continued to face unprecedented challenges. The following summer, the DSC therefore agreed to carry out primary research to help uncover the ongoing impact of Covid-19 on disabled students' experiences across the HE lifecycle.

In the first phase of the research, the DSC commissioned a survey to take place between May and June 2021, investigating areas relating to transition, blended learning and assessment, and mental health and wellbeing. With thanks to support from sector organisations and HEPs, a total of 473 disabled students responded. The survey was open to students studying at all levels, including 64% of respondents studying at undergraduate level, and 27.5% studying at postgraduate/PhD level.

In many cases responses were stark, with 80% of all respondents reporting that Covid-19 had a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing. Close to half felt that their provider had been ineffective in considering disabled students' needs when changing or adapting support offered during Covid-19. However, there were also areas of opportunity, such as the fact many disabled students reported benefiting from the greater flexibility offered to them by learning and being assessed online.

Further in-depth qualitative research was conducted with 35 disabled students to explore issues in-depth, with a follow-up report published by the DSC in February 2022. A blogpost authored by the lead researcher, Hannah Borkin, was published on Wonkhe⁹ highlighting some of the key findings. Of note, disabled students felt that their needs had not been prioritised, especially since the interests of the majority of non-disabled students tended to come first. The DSC is confident this will change upon learning some of the lessons from the pandemic.

The two reports surrounding this research, including the interim report outlining the results from the survey (DSC, 2021), have cumulatively been viewed over 1,000 times on the DSC's campaign page.

⁹ See wonkhe.com/blogs/the-post-pandemic-needs-of-disabled-students-need-to-be-prioritised-not-generalised/

3.5 Our roundtable on the impact of automated captioning on disabled students' identified some complex challenges

In September 2021, a number of Commissioners raised concern with respect to the provision of automated captioning, for which its use had largely increased when Covid-19 began. Automated captions are used most frequently when lectures and/or seminars are recorded, making them available to review after the session has ended.

In-depth research carried out by the DSC investigating the impact of Covid-19 on disabled students' experiences (2021) highlighted concerns around automated captioning such as a lack of consistent application between modules, delays to checking transcripts, as well as a perception from some HEPs that transcripts were seen as 'notes'. Commissioners also noted within JISCmail lists that members of staff were feeling a disproportionate burden in the face of limited resource to carry out editing.

In December 2021, the DSC agreed to therefore hold a roundtable to explore the challenges surrounding the use of automated captioning in teaching and learning in HE, and its impact on both disabled students and staff. Clearly this was a timely event, as places for the roundtable filled up in the space of two days. Contributions were received from academic and support staff, disability practitioners, sector specialists as well as representatives from lecture capture and captioning software providers. A member of the Cabinet Office's Government Digital Service¹⁰ also delivered an introduction to the legislative context and the audits carried out on universities regarding digital accessibility (which includes captioning).

Findings from the roundtable suggested that there is currently no optimal solution for addressing the challenges surrounding the use of automated captioning. Despite benefiting a wide array of disabled students and across a range of impairment types, the challenges appear significant and in some cases are causing disabled students to fall behind. The issue of inaccurate transcripts is compounded by the fact that academic staff do not have the adequate resource to edit and correct errors, and this is disproportionately impacting staff with certain protected characteristics. The DSC's publication, Exploring the use of automated captioning and its impact on disabled students in HE (2022) outlines some initial recommendations.

The DSC has agreed to explore both the technological (with Jisc) and pedagogical (with Advance HE) implications of automated captioning, and to work closely with these organisations to progress learning.

¹⁰ See www.gov.uk/government/organisations/government-digital-service

3.6 The DSC highlighted a particular need to support disabled students during the transition to employment

With a view to prioritise the lives of disabled students', the University Partnerships Programme (UPP) Foundation Students Futures Commission invited the DSC to contribute to the Commission's third oral evidence session around employability in October 2021. During this session, which received evidence from universities, careers service leaders, employers and business groups, the DSC highlighted key findings from its primary research: only 7.9% of disabled students reported receiving disability-specific careers advice in the past year, despite a survey by AGCAS,¹¹ which reports that wherein 77% of universities offered tailored careers and employability initiatives for disabled students.

The oral evidence session also coincided with the DSC's publication Disabled Graduate Employment (2021), which called on universities and colleges to reflect on the nature and level of support provided to disabled students and graduates moving into employment, and upon employers to reflect on the impact of the pandemic for their recruitment strategies, ensuring that they are fully inclusive of disabled graduates. The publication included 13 recommendations for HEPs, Chambers of Commerce, Confederation of British Industry, Institution of Directors and employers. It has been viewed over 400 times on the DSC's campaign page.

Moving forward, the DSC has urged any focus on transition to the workplace to be upfront about the additional challenges disabled students face entering employment. Disabled graduates should also be made aware of the flexibility that is on offer to them; the Student Future's Commission have called on universities to work with employers to improve careers advice and guidance that prepares graduates for non-traditional workplaces as we transition post pandemic to a more flexible work environment.

The DSC will continue to work with AGCAS, following the publication of its forthcoming What Happens Next? Report¹² to explore key barriers facing disabled graduates. The 2022 edition culminates research conducted for almost 20 years, which explores the impact that having a disability can have on a graduate's destination after leaving university and their subsequent prospects in the labour market.

Finally, the DSC has advised on the design and development of a new government 'passport' to support disabled graduates into employment.¹³ Currently in its trial stage, the DSC looks forward to working with the trial institutions, Department of Work and Pensions and DfE to make a positive impact at the employment stage and reduce the number of times required to share information about a disability after leaving higher education.

¹¹ See www.agcas.org.uk/

¹² See www.agcas.org.uk/News/what-happens-next-2021/268397

¹³ See www.gov.uk/government/news/new-government-passport-to-help-disabled-graduates-get-in-to-employment

3.7 The DSC has continued to inform the sector of its progress of enhancing the experience of disabled students

One of the DSC's priorities is to share our insights to influence change at the sector level. Our insights are communicated in various, creative ways including presentations to sector organisations and participating in conferences. We have published over 15 blogposts over the past year highlighting good practice in the sector, all of which have received substantial views. Our key communications from the past year are included below:

- + submitted responses to various sector consultations, including UCAS' Access Programme, the OfS' consultation on Regulating Quality and Standards in English Higher Education, as well as to UPP's Student Futures' Commission call for written evidence to explore how universities could take action to support students during and after the pandemic
- + delivered oral evidence to UPP's Student Future's Commission on barriers to employment for disabled graduates
- + presented our insights (informed by our primary research investigating the impact of Covid-19 on disabled students) at various conferences, including Advance HE's annual EDI Conference and the National Student Services Conference.
- + delivered bespoke presentations and webinars outlining insights on particular student groups, including a presentation to an Academic Registrars Group highlighting the impact of Covid-19 on the experiences of disabled students at postgraduate level.
- + Geoff Layer, Chair of the DSC, attended a key stakeholder group roundtable for a discussion on DSA to inform the publication of Lord Holmes' report into the DSA (2022).
- + members of the DSC have authored various blogposts on issues of importance, including:
 - a blogpost to support the publication of a new guide to support students who stammer.
 - a blogpost to explore what the passing of the new British Sign Language Bill could mean for deaf students in higher education.
- + the DSC continue to influence the sector via membership of various groups, including the Disabled Students' Stakeholder Group and TASO's advisory group for mental health and disability.

4. Looking forward: ambitions for the DSC

In addition to outlining what the DSC has successfully achieved over the past year, we believe it is vital to acknowledge what we can do differently, or more of, in our third year.

2022-2023 will bring opportunities to understand and further explore the deepening impact of Covid-19 on disabled students' experiences, as well as to explore what lessons have been learnt within the sector to date that should be channelled into a post-pandemic, accessible model of higher education. Echoing DSUK's 2022 report, while for some accessibility of their course has improved (29.6%), for others it has worsened and so it is vital to reflect on the nuanced lessons HEPs should be taking forward. The sector must be wary about rolling back on some of the adjustments put in place during the pandemic, especially as disabled students know what is feasible in terms of support.

Over the next year, the DSC will continue to work through the student life-cycle model outlined in its work-plan (Appendix 2) to structure its work, and will work with sector organisations and interest groups to meet five important objectives:

- + to promote improved and enhanced access and transition to higher education for disabled students
- + to promote an inclusive student support and wellbeing approach
- + to promote the enhancement of inclusive learning and teaching
- + to seek to enhance the employability of disabled students
- + to inform the sector of progress with enhancing the experience of disabled students.

In order to achieve the above, there are certain steps the DSC feels it needs to take to ensure it is in a strong position to make recommendations that are both authentic and meaningful. The following will underscore the work carried out in our third year:

- + **To centre the voices of disabled students:** in DSUK's report (2022), it was found that the second most common response to the question of what universities should learn moving forward was to 'listen to disabled students'. The DSC's primary research investigating the impact of Covid-19 on disabled students' experiences (2021, 2022) highlighted its importance, wherein one participant provided the following feedback:

“Conducting research like this, allowing students to feel heard by creating safe spaces for them to share experiences, is really important for validation and ensuring changes are done in co-creation.”

The DSC is committed to ensuring the voices of disabled students continue to be at the centre of the work we do, and we will work closely with sector interest groups (i.e. NUS and DSUK) as well as third sector organisations working on behalf of disabled students to ensure diverse disabled student representation at all of our future events.

In particular, we look forward to working closely with HEE on areas of alignment, including exploring and addressing the needs of disabled health learners transitioning into the medical workforce. This will include consulting directly with disabled students and graduates via focus groups.

- + **Ensuring we do not take a 'one-size-fits-all approach':** experiences documented during the pandemic highlight that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach does not work in practice, and approaches must be tailored and individualised as far as possible by impairment type. This issue was highlighted in the Higher Education Commission's report *Arriving at Thriving* (2020) published in the midst of the pandemic, wherein disabled students recounted that when assigned to accessible accommodation, little notice was paid to their specific needs. As far as possible, the DSC will be recommending distinct and tailored approaches across the student lifecycle, and with an intersectional lens.
- + **Working closely with practitioners to understand the needs of disabled students:** in its final year, the DSC would like to consult with disability practitioners to explore both the knowledge gaps and areas of prioritisation for those directly involved in the management or delivery services of disabled students.

The following section (4.1) outlines a specific area of priority for the DSC in its final year of work.

4.1 Developing a national disabled students' access IAG framework

At the DSC's quarterly meeting on 10 March 2022, Commissioners came together to map the perceived Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) stages and processes in respect of access to HE, with an agreed view that by improving IAG at the point of access, we will inadvertently increase disabled students' sense of belonging when settling in and avoid challenges further down the line, i.e. in the form of complaints submitted to the OIA. Within Advance HE/HEP's *Student Academic Experience Survey* (2021) 'making it clear what is expected of me' was reported as the fourth highest priority (35%) of all respondents in terms of what most contributes to a students' sense of belonging at their institution.

IAG is a process through which options can be explored and the consequences understood, thus enabling informed choice and decision-making. IAG should always be impartial to enable effective decision-making, but evidence has shown that all too often providers respond differently in relation to individual marketing practices, and currently there is a lack of comprehensive national information on HEP support for disabled students. In particular, disabled students do not have a clear understanding of the support and access to funding that is provided by the DSA, with Lord Holmes *Report into the Disabled Students' Allowance*

(2022) recommending that the Department for Education (DfE) launch an information and awareness campaign around the DSA.

Communication during the pandemic has also been inconsistent (DSC, 2020), with findings demonstrating that disabled students transitioning onto undergraduate or postgraduate courses for the first time during Covid-19 were unsure about various processes required in order to get support in place. The following responses were shared by disabled students when asked 'what additional support would you have liked to ensure a smooth transition prior to commencing your studies?'

"Staff explaining clearly what is expected of me and what they can do to support me."

First year undergraduate student

"Better communication from the university about course and what studying would be like and content of modules."

First year postgraduate student

There are currently a number of identified issues with IAG in respect to access to HE that likely affect all students, including disabled students and their non-disabled peers. This includes:

- + a focus on what universities offer as opposed to all higher education providers
- + an emphasis on school to higher education as a 'golden route', with other routes perceived as less important
- + a limited understanding of modern higher education within schools and colleges
- + focus on IAG to undergraduate level, but not postgraduate taught and research
- + institutional IAG is differentially resourced across the sector, and by subject discipline
- + competing aspects of intersectionality, including differing areas of priority.

With the above perceived as some of the more systemic issues surrounding IAG which could take longer to change, there are also specific issues facing disabled students which, in comparison, have the capacity to be improved in the short to medium-term. The DSC recommends the following:

- + The IAG community must prioritise the needs of disabled students, and refocus IAG so that it doesn't consider the needs and interests of the majority non-disabled students first. Those with a key responsibility for designing and implementing IAG should be provided with the necessary training and resources to help raise awareness.

- + IAG should reflect and acknowledge that disabled students are not a homogenous group and may have more than one disability. A 'one-size-fits-all' approach will not suffice, and as much as possible HEPs should be seeking to outline what is available in terms of individualised support.
- + Language and definitional differences between schools, colleges and higher education need to be simplified, and the respective sectors should explore a way to make language and vocabulary choices more seamless between the settings to remove ambiguity. This will be especially beneficial for disabled students applying for the DSA.
- + IAG must find ways to ensure a student is not required to repeatedly share information about their condition at the point of accessing higher education.
- + The OfS should strive to more closely monitor access for disabled students, either through the use of Access and Participation Plans or in practice through the use of qualitative research.
- + IAG should include clear information about disability support services available within a provider, as well as within their respective students' union, and how a disabled student can easily contact these teams before commencing their studies.
- + IAG in relation to access to HE needs to be more closely intertwined with other stages of the student lifecycle, including IAG within HE as well as IAG in relation to future employment. For example, access to HE should make reference to approaches by both Employer and Professional Statutory Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs) to supporting disabled students.

Moving forward, the DSC would like to explore ways to create a national blueprint for IAG in relation to access to HE to improve consistency for disabled students. More consistent IAG will ensure disabled students are fully aware of the nature of their study, individualised support available and possible challenges they may face. The DSC intends to work closely with relevant sector agencies, including aligning with UCAS' forthcoming research on disabled students to help shape IAG guidance for HEPs, and ensure any changes recommended by the DSC are communicated directly to disabled students.

5. Review of disabled students' experiences: drawing on evidence from the sector

To accompany the DSC's annual report, we have undertaken a rapid review of evidence from the sector relating to disabled students' experiences.

There is a clear sense from the literature and sector reports that disabled students have been marginalised and disadvantaged during both the transition to online learning and the transition back to campus. Frustrations centre in several key areas, including:

- + administrative burden
- + online learning
- + inclusive and accessible design.

Administrative burden: hidden inaccessibility

Awareness of the administrative burden students experience is growing. The Disabled Student Survey (GDI Hub and Snowdon Trust, 2021) identified administrative burden as one of their six challenges, stating 'Administrative burdens create stress and anguish; taking valuable time away from study and social life.' Examples of administrative burden and the impact of it are illustrated throughout the report by direct quotes from disabled students, expressing, for example, frustration at having to repeat their needs and disability details repeatedly to different people:

"I found it frustrating that different parts of the university did not talk to each other about my requirements, so I often found myself having to explain from scratch what my situation was."

"Despite being informed in advance about the support I required, it was not in place when I arrived at the university. I had to ask for the same support every day and each time I had a different support personnel."

Students also expressed the impact of being consistently disadvantaged by the hidden barriers that administrative burden presents.

"There are constant roadblocks that you have to negotiate just to get to zero - just to literally get to a baseline that other people already reach."

It is evident from the literature that administrative tasks can present barriers for disabled students in different ways. In 2018, Coughlan and Lister (2018) found that many administrative processes can be inaccessible to disabled students or incompatible with their disabilities. For example, forms may be inaccessible with assistive technologies such as

screenreaders, questions in forms may be worded to be inaccessible for neurodiverse students, dyslexic students may struggle with the written or reading element of paperwork, and students with mental health difficulties may find interviews or other administrative aspects can heighten anxiety or stress.

Additionally, the stress of undertaking processes, anxiety around the outcomes, and the time the processes took away from studies, all had a significant impact on disabled students. As these processes were not part of learning and teaching, they were felt to be hidden inaccessibilities that students had not expected; the Disabled Student Survey found that '43% of disabled students said they had spent more time on administrative tasks than they had expected.'

In DSUK's report 'Going back is not a choice' (2022), they also highlighted administrative burden as one their key lessons for the sector, calling for 'streamlined systems' and 'Improved communications between students, university departments and funding streams', that are 'desperately required to reduce the time-consuming and mentally draining burden of administrative tasks'. Lord Holmes also explored this issue in his Report into the DSA (2022) where it was highlighted that 'administrative burden can act as a barrier to study rather than the support intended by the scheme'. Tackling administrative burden, making administrative processes more flexible, empathetic and human-centred, is clearly a priority for the sector.

Online learning: pandemic marmite

Disabled Students UK's survey neatly identifies the dichotomy that online learning presents, particularly in their juxtaposition of quotes from disabled students who either benefit or are disadvantaged by online learning:

"Lack of understanding of the difficulties online learning presents for students with hearing impairment greatly impacts studies and increases stress."

"[I] Love online lectures because it saves lots of time and mental energy going in. Smaller lab classes are amazing."

It has long been acknowledged in the literature (perhaps more than in higher education policy) that disabled students are not a single homogenous group. This is particularly apparent when it comes to online learning and differences in experiences by impairment type were highlighted in the DSC's previous annual report (2021).

Even before the pandemic, many students chose online or distance learning as they found it preferable to face-to-face learning (Kotera et al, 2019; Pearson et al, 2019), and the Disabled Students Survey clearly highlighted that some disabled students who chose face-to-face learning thrived when it came to online learning. Students can find that online learning gives them more 'control over studies' (Kotera et al, 2019), they can find it more flexible (Pearson et al, 2019), it can reduce anxiety (DSUK, 2022), or that it requires them to expend less energy on travel and being present (GDI Hub and Snowdon Trust, 2021; DSUK

2022). DSUK also write poignantly in their report that 'when we asked disabled students to write about what they hoped their institution would learn from the pandemic, the single most common answer was that they hoped the university would keep some aspect of online/distance learning'. However, as the Disabled Student Survey highlights, it does not suit all. For example, 'neurodiverse students reported challenges with multi-tasking during online sessions, and some deaf students have captioning and translation barriers' (GDI Hub and Snowdon Trust, 2021). The issue of captions is discussed as a separate issue later in this report.

It is important not to overlook the perspectives and experiences of disabled academics during the transition to online learning. Hannam-Swain and Bailey (2021) present a thought-provoking autoethnographic account of experiences of two disabled academics during the pandemic, highlighting issues of anxiety, powerlessness and frustration that are shared with many disabled students, and calling for greater flexibility and consideration of disabilities in future. Similarly, an Advance HE Insights Event 'Furthering disability equality for HE staff and students' resulted in a number of recommendations:

- + 'Furthering disability equality needs to be a collective responsibility, instead of disproportionately falling on the shoulders of disabled staff and students.
- + The process of disclosing a disability needs to be more inclusive and flexible, as well as less burdensome for the person who is disclosing. Delegates also suggested a move away from 'disclosing' to 'sharing' disabilities, to take some distance from terminology that might contribute to an environment of fear and stigma around disabled people.
- + Adding to this, to encourage positive disclosure, providers need to better manage expectations as well as make available clear timelines outlining when reasonable adjustments will be implemented.
- + We do not need to re-invent the wheel. On the contrary, HE should capitalise on scaling up existing pockets of good practice and focus on sharing guidelines around how barriers can be overcome. This could come in the form of an open-access resource hub, as well as providing more opportunities to conduct and showcase research.
- + HE must increasingly find ways to celebrate their disabled staff and student community, and to share the value that disabled people bring to education.
- + Disability inclusion needs to be more than a tick-box exercise and must go beyond data. For this to materialise, providers need to invest in the community through staff and student partnerships, co-creation and co-production of research. 'Nothing about us without us' as one of our delegates aptly put it.

- + Senior leaders must consider ways to empower their disabled staff to set up Staff Networks, as well as provide more safe spaces and clear processes for students to raise issues and concerns.

(Sotiropoulou and Borkin, 2021)

Inclusive and accessible design

Seale et al (2021) encapsulate the ongoing and ever-present need for inclusive and accessible design with a poignant student quote:

“My journey has been successful. I gained two honours degrees in 2017 and I am in year 2 of my Masters in online and distance education. But without accessible materials, accessible equipment and the support of fellow students, my journey would be totally finished.”

Unsurprisingly, this need is also recognised in other reports and literature. DSUK highlight the need for an anticipatory approach to inclusion, and for inclusive and accessible design to be prioritised moving forward. They call for ‘all HEPs to:

- + create an institution-wide digital accessibility policy
- + create or acquire mandatory training for their professional support and academic staff to be able to follow this policy (DSUK, 2022).

Examples of inaccessibility abound. The Disabled Students Survey reveals inaccessible events, premises and student housing, and DSUK recount details of ‘delayed or inaccessible materials’ uncaptioned lectures, a lack of reasonable adjustments or support, and other inaccessibilities in teaching and learning (GDI Hub and Snowdon Trust, 2021; DSUK, 2022). And it is not only HEPs that need to prioritise inclusive and accessible design; the DSA report highlights that accessibility was not always prioritised during the DSA application process, with reports of ‘inaccessible communications’ and inaccessible assessment centres (Holmes, 2022).

The Disabled Student Survey states the importance of ‘removing barriers’, ‘streamlining systems’ and providing a more ‘equitable experience’ (GDI Hub and Snowdon Trust, 2021). They issue a powerful call for leadership accountability, saying ‘senior university leadership must champion a more inclusive approach across social and academic planning to meet the diverse needs of the student body’ (GDI Hub and Snowdon Trust, 2021).

5.1 Secondary data focused on disabled students

Findings from Advance HE's annual *Equality in higher education: students' statistical 2021 report* help to establish contextualise and situate the DSC's achievements over the past year. The report itself aims to assist the sector in better understanding the main equality challenges for both staff and students, and directing future efforts to overcome them. To support our growing understanding around the main equality challenges facing disabled students across the student lifecycle (and thus where to focus our work moving forward), Advance HE has taken a deep-dive to pull out key detail beyond the headline data. The data focuses on the whole of the UK, rather than England-only.

- + Across all levels of study, DSA take-up was highest among those with autistic spectrum/social communication disorders (45%), specific learning difficulties (41%), or two or more impairments (41%). Take up was lowest for disabled students with a mental health condition (19%).
- + This pattern is replicated, albeit with slightly higher numbers, at first-year undergraduate level. For example, 48% are in receipt of DSA with autistic spectrum/social communication disorder, whereas only 21% are in receipt of DSA with a mental health condition. The pattern shifts slightly at postgraduate level. Here, the highest take-up is for two or more impairments (34%), closely followed by specific learning difficulties (33.6%).
- + The DSA take-up rate is slightly higher for Science, Engineering and Technology subjects (34%) than non-Science, Engineering and Technology subjects (31%), and is lowest in combined subjects, humanities and general sciences. Creative Arts and Geography/Environmental Studies are outliers in the non-SET subjects, with higher DSA take-up rates (37%).
- + The participation and awarding gap varies significantly by subject area, with no clear rationale as to why. The largest participation gap between disabled and non-disabled students is in Business Studies (7.9%), followed by Engineering and Technology (2.8%) and Psychology (2.4%). The largest awarding gap between disabled and non-disabled students is in Veterinary Science (5.9%) followed by Agriculture (5.7%).
- + Disabled students are less likely than non-disabled students to be aged under 21 when they finish their degree (29% in comparison to 36%) and are more likely to be aged over 26 (16% to 13%).

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- + Around half of disabled students are in full-time employment at the end of their degree (50%), compared to 59% of non-disabled students. Disabled students are also more likely than non-disabled students to work part-time (13% to 10%), and slightly more likely to progress to go on to further study (9% vs 8%). Outcomes for disabled students appear to be broadly in line with the outcomes for disabled people aged 16-64 as a whole, with ONS data from 2020 suggesting that 52% are unemployed, with more working part-time than full-time.

In addition to investigating the data from Advance HE's *Student Statistical Report 2021*, we also took a deep-dive into the data beyond what was presented in Advance HE's/Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI)'s *Student Academic Experience Survey Report* (2021), to better understand disabled students' experiences in comparison to non-disabled students. This annual report shows how full-time undergraduate students rate their time in higher education and their attitudes towards policy issues that impact upon them. Below, we have highlighted some of the pertinent findings based on questions asked within the survey that link with work conducted by the DSC:

- + The majority of both disabled and non-disabled students felt that their university experience met their expectations, however satisfaction figures were slightly lower for disabled students than for non-disabled students. 30% of disabled students reported that their experience was worse than they had expected, compared to 26% of non-disabled students.
- + The most prominent reason why disabled students reported that their experience was worse than expected centred on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and opportunities for interaction. 61% of disabled students felt that they did not receive enough support during Covid-19.
- + Disabled students were more likely to score each potential factor of 'what contributes most to your sense of belonging at your institution' higher than non-disabled students, suggesting a sense of belonging is important to this group. 38% of disabled students selected 'making it clear what is expected of me' as a contributing factor, compared to 34% of non-disabled students. Other contributing factors included 'access to support services' and 'feeling my views were listened to'.
- + Disabled students were less likely than non-disabled students to be satisfied with the use of educational technology⁴ (45% compared to 52% respectively).

⁴ The last year has seen a sea change in how technology is being used in learning across the sector, and like many aspects in life, the opportunities offered by technology have not only helped mitigate the impact of the pandemic, but have also introduced some potentially permanent changes in how things are done (Advance HE/HEPI 2021).

6. Concluding remarks

Concluding what has been another difficult year for disabled students, our work has highlighted that access to higher education is still not a given even when changes have been happening at an unprecedented speed. With flexibility no doubt increasing to accommodate some of the restrictions put in place as a result of Covid-19, clear challenges remain and it is vital that the sector continues to build on its pandemic response to date to help make a difference to the experience of disabled students. This includes ensuring disabled students are placed at the top of the to-do list for senior leaders who have the authority to make consideration of disabled students' needs the norm.

After consulting extensively with the sector - and most importantly – with disabled students directly to better understand the emerging impact of the pandemic on their experience, four clear themes (all beginning with the letter 'c') have been identified that we believe form the foundations of the changes that need to be made:

1. **Communication:** consult and communicate with disabled students as often and inclusively as possible and ensure they are made aware of any changes from an early stage.
2. **Consistency:** a consistent approach across departments and between HEPs is required – currently there is too much differentiation between what is and what is not possible for disabled students in relation to support across the sector.
3. **Choice:** anticipatory reasonable adjustments and a more flexible approach to teaching, learning and assessment provides disabled students with the choice to learn and be assessed in a way that supports, rather than impacts on, their disability.
4. **Certainty:** during a period of rapid change and uncertainty, disabled students need to feel confident that support will be in place at the commencement of their studies. If there is a known delay or shortfall, then a period of interim support will enable disabled students to continue without negative impact and cover any period of lack of support from reduced funding

The DSC is well positioned to ensure that the sector simply does not roll-back on the progress it has made during the pandemic; it should be an ambition of all to both avoid and eradicate previous examples of inaccessibility. Ensuring that improved communication, consistency, choice and certainty remain at the heart as we move forward, the DSC anticipates an exciting third year in which disabled students' needs and interests will be placed at the top of the agenda.

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Appendix 1 - Glossary of terms

The following table presents abbreviations, acronyms and definitions of terms presented in the Disabled Students' Commission annual report 2021-2022:

| Term | Definition |
|-------------------------|---|
| AGCAS | The Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services. An expert membership organisation for higher education student career development and graduate employment professionals. |
| APP | Access and Participation Plans. Plans that set out how higher education providers (HEPs) will improve equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups. |
| BSL | British Sign Language |
| Disabled student | A person studying in higher education with a condition or impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to perform normal daily activities. The DSC adopts 'identity-first' language (ie disabled student rather than student with disabilities) due to our adherence to the social model of disability. |
| DfE | Department of Education |
| DSA | Disabled Students' Allowance. Funding provided by the Department of Education to support disabled students in further or higher education. The funding helps to cover the additional costs that arise due to requiring equipment or support to access teaching and learning. |
| DSC | Disabled Students' Commission |

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| DSSLG | Disabled Students' Sector Leadership Group |
| DSUK | Disabled Students UK. A grassroots student-led organisation working to make universities truly accountable to their disabled students and to disability law. |
| DWP | Department of Work and Pensions |
| HE | Higher education. Tertiary education at level four or above. |
| HEE | Health Education England. Its function is to provide national leadership and coordination for the education and training within the health and public health workforce within England. |
| HEP | Higher Education Provider. As per the HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency) definition, a HEP is any institution that provides higher education. This includes some Further Education (FE) colleges which provide courses at a HE level. |
| HEPI | Higher Education Policy Institute |
| IAG | Information, Advice and Guidance |
| NADP | National Association of Disability Practitioners. A professional association for those involved in the management or delivery of services for disabled students in the tertiary sector. |
| NUS | National Union of Students, a confederation of students' unions in the UK. |
| OfS | The Office for Students, the regulatory body for higher education in England. |

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| OIA | Office of the Independent Adjudicator for higher education. An independent body set up to review students' complaints. |
| PSRB | Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies. Diverse group of organisations that includes professional bodies, regulators and those with statutory authority over a profession or group of professionals. |
| QAA | The Quality Assurance Agency. Works with HEPs and regulatory bodies to maintain and enhance quality and standards. |
| SBS | Subject Benchmark Statement. Describe the nature of study and the academic standards expected of graduates in specific subject areas. |
| SLC | Student Loans Company. Administers loans and grants to students in colleges and universities in the UK. |
| TASO | Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education. |
| UCAS | Universities and Colleges Admissions Service. |
| UKRI | UK Research and Innovation. Non-departmental public body of the Government of the United Kingdom that directs research and innovation funding, |
| UUK | Universities UK. The collective voice of universities in the UK. |

Appendix 2 – DSC Work Plan

The following work plan sets out the DSC's work for the remaining year. The final column on 'impact' helps to conceptualise and map the DSC's activities against its Terms of Reference to challenge, inform and influence effective practice.

| Theme | Objective | Actions | Sector organisation / interest group | Output | Impact |
|-------|--|---|---|--|---|
| 1 | To promote improved and enhanced access and transition to higher education for disabled students | 1.1. To help shape IAG guidance through UCAS forums, and begin to address issues for non-UCAS applicants | UCAS, HESA, Uniconnect and Discover Uni | Create a sector standard for the presentation of IAG for disabled students | Effective Practice at sector organisation or organisation level |
| | | 1.2. To promote comprehensive IAG for disabled students in institutional processes, including information on DSA | UCAS, NADP, SLC | Clearer information base and HEP ownership of providing IAG | Effective Practice at provider level |
| | | 1.3. Ensure disability question wording in HE is reflective of the social model of disability, and matches up with language used in school and FE contexts. Work to make language and vocabulary used in the HE sector around disability as transparent as possible | UCAS, HESA, SLC, OfS, NADP | Updated question wording for UCAS, HESA, OfS, SLC, HEP's | Influence and guidance for sector agencies and providers |

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|---|--|--|--|---|--|
| | | 1.4. Address issue of multiple identification of disabled students and follow-up support given through DSA | OfS, SLC, DfE, Disability Passport Trial members | Seamless system that recognises an individual's disability | Influence at sector level. This is an established policy problem and is reflected in the National Strategy |
| | | 1.5. Work with the SLC and DfE to ease the DSA process | SLC, DfE, OfS | Disabled students have DSA adjustment in place at the start of their course | Influence sector level. This is an established policy problem |
| 2 | To promote an inclusive student support and wellbeing approach | 2.1. Determine what existing data is held on disabled students' complaints and work with Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) on understanding trends and issues. Consider ways to improve the complaints procedure process for disabled students in respect of implementation of the DSA | OIA | Separate complaints procedures from access to support issues | Developing high quality evidence to challenge and inform sector and provider practice- New data or presentation of data to inform the sector and providers |
| | | 2.2. Tie in with work on Student Space and other allied mental health support based on impact of pandemic on disabled students' mental health and wellbeing | OfS, Student Minds, UUK/ GuildHE | Promote fully inclusive access to student mental health support for disabled students | Effective practice at provider level |

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| 3 | To promote the enhancement of inclusive learning and teaching | 3.1. Recommend actions around improving digital accessibility and pedagogical approach in light of blended learning approach i.e. the provision of automated captioning and use of online platforms | JISC/ Advance HE/OfS | Comprehensive guidance on technological and pedagogical options | Effective practice at provider level |
| | | 3.2. Investigate elements of QAA work that interact with the work of the DSC, i.e. online proctoring and the issues this may cause for disabled students | QAA | Greater recognition of disability in QAA guidance | Challenge and influence sector organisation |
| | | 3.3. Investigate HEA fellowship criteria (professional standards framework) to embed disability awareness consistency across modules. Potential to tie in with NADP work on accreditation of specialist disability staff. | Advance HE, NADP | Secure amended accreditation criteria to specifically include disability within inclusive learning | Effective practice at provider level |
| | | 3.4. Option to produce guidance to complement the Quality Code to include information on inclusivity and reasonable adjustments | QAA, Advance HE | HEPs signing up to revised quality code with impact on the curriculum | Challenge and influence sector organisation |
| | | 3.5. Continue to influence the SLC through membership of the DSSG | SLC | Agreed with SLC | Influence sector organisation |

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|---|---|--|-------------------|---|---|
| 4 | To seek to enhance the employability of disabled students | 4.1. Enhance existing employability guidance to understand key barriers for disabled graduates entering employment or placements, by impairment type | AGCAS, Advance HE | Employability framework for the sector | Effective practice for providers, PSRBs and employers |
| | | 4.2 Co-produce guidance exploring the transition of disabled health learners into the medical workforce and wider NHS economy | HEE | Guidance for the sector | Effective practice for providers and employers |
| | | 4.3. Work with PSRBs, and elicit feedback on how they can implement more flexibility and choice in assessment | QAA | Change in approach by PSRBs to understand the need for greater flexibility | Challenge and influence sector (PSRBs) agencies |
| | | 4.4. Ensure that disability issues and the student experience are addressed in the skills agenda | AoC, UUK, OfS | Guidance materials for the sector | Effective practice for providers and employers |
| 5 | To inform the sector of progress with enhancing the experience of disabled students | 5.1. Design and conduct primary research addressing learnings from the pandemic, with a disabled student experience focus | Advance HE, OfS | Robust and systematic data collection of disabled student experience across the sector and provider types | Developing high quality evidence to influence and inform effective practice at provider and sector organisation level |

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|--|--|---|-----------------|---|---|
| | | 5.2. Liaise with OfS over APP monitoring | OfS | Combined HEP progress with embedding disability strategy | Influence and challenge sector organisation (OfS) |
| | | 5.3. Revisit recommendations made in DSC publications and guidance, possibly picking up elements in series of tweets or poster campaign | OfS, Advance HE | Poster campaign at the start of each academic year, increase student-facing visibility of issues. | Challenge, inform and advise the sector. Develop further evidence of effective practice as required |

Appendix 3 – Pen portraits of the Commission

Geoff Layer – Chair of the Disabled Students' Commission



Geoff Layer recently retired as Vice Chancellor of the University of Wolverhampton, having worked for over 40 years in post compulsory education. He is now working on strategic development for Coventry University.

He graduated in Law at Newcastle Polytechnic in 1977, taught at Sheffield Hallam University from 1983 to 1999 and took on institutional wide roles in developing widening participation strategies, modular degree programmes and established a disabled student support service.

He moved to the University of Bradford and later became its Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic). Whilst at Bradford he was seconded to HEFCE to develop their approach to widening participation and developed its Aim Higher Programme.

He became Vice Chancellor of the University of Wolverhampton in 2011 becoming its longest serving Vice Chancellor when he retired in 2021. He has led their approach to being more inclusive, flexible in learning approaches, committed to its region and utilising the role of a university as an anchor for economic, social and community enhancement.

He has researched and developed access and inclusion issues throughout his academic career and has been a Professor of Lifelong Learning since 1995 with numerous research projects and publications and sector leading developments.

He was a board member of Advance HE, Chair of the HE sector's EDI Committee and Chair of the SLC Stakeholder Forum until. He led the Disabled Student Sector Leadership Group from 2015 until 2018. In 2019 the Universities Minister appointed him as Chair of the newly formed Disabled Student Commission to promote the interests of disabled students. In 2021 the Minister for Disabilities appointed him as the Disability Ambassador for Universities. He has recently become Chair of the Board at Fircroft Residential Adult Education College and is a trustee of the Workers Education Association.

He is a passionate Sunderland fan and plays cricket for Sheffield Collegiate Cricket Club.

Geoff is an Emeritus Professor of Lifelong Learning at the University of Wolverhampton.

John Blake – Director for Fair Access and Participation, OfS



John Blake took up his position at the Office for Students in January 2022. His role is to ensure universities and colleges are doing all they can to support learners from all backgrounds, especially the most disadvantaged, to access and succeed in higher education.

Prior to joining OfS, he was a senior leader and researcher in the schools sector, leading on public affairs and curriculum research and design for Ark, policy and strategy for Now Teach and History initial teacher education for the Harris Federation. He has also worked as Head of

Education and Social Reform for the think tank, Policy Exchange, was a founder governor of Oak National Academy, and served as an advisor to the government on reforms to initial teacher training and continuing professional development.

John acknowledges that disabled students too often feel left out of discussions around access, and that they are asked to accept a more difficult path through education. Through his work on the DSC, he hopes this will be an outcome that the higher education sector rejects. He looks forward to joining in the Commission's work in both listening to and supporting disabled students to move through university with success and dignity.

Sean Cullen – Doctoral Researcher, Brunel University



Sean Cullen joined the DSC following his previous role as Disabled Students Officer for Brunel University. During his time as DSO he has raised awareness of the issues disabled students often face and helped the university to make changes to improve the lives of these students, such as flattening the campus bridge, building accessible studio flats, and overhauling the way blue badge parking is managed.

Sean's passion for disability advocacy comes from his experience in the challenges he and his peers faced throughout the student lifecycle, including post graduate study and industrial placements. As someone with physical, learning, and visual disabilities Sean has gained an appreciation for many of the barriers faced by today's students, as well as many of the areas of good practice and support available and hopes to bring this experience to the commission to help create positive change within the HE sector.

With a focus on positive and achievable change, Sean still keeps an active role within the disability consultation and review boards at Brunel University whilst studying for his PhD in engineering. He is also pleased to have taken part in conferences and outreach programmes to help better the lives of the next generation of disabled students.

Susan Daniels – Chief Executive, National Deaf Children's Society



Susan Daniels has been Chief Executive of the National Deaf Children's Society since 1992, and has seen the charity grow from an income of £1 million in 1992 to over £24 million in 2018-19. Before joining the National Deaf Children's Society, Susan was Head of Education, Employment and Training and then Head of Policy and Research at the Royal National Institute for Deaf People, (now Action on Hearing Loss). In 2006, she was awarded an OBE for services to deaf children and their families.

Susan was a Commissioner of the Disability Rights Commission from 2003 until its merger with the Commission for Equality and Human Rights at the end of September 2007. Until November 2010 she was Chair of the UK Council on Deafness, the umbrella body for all organisations working in the field of deafness, which provides information, advice and support to member organisations and represents the views of the sector to government and policy makers.

Susan is also currently Chair of the NHS Newborn Hearing Screening Programme Quality Assurance Advisory Group, which monitors the delivery of the programme across hospitals in England, among other membership roles.

Drawing on her understanding of the needs and aspirations of disabled students and her experience of developing policy and improving practice in this field, Susan hopes to be able to positively impact on disabled students' experience of accessing and progressing through higher education and tackling the attainment gap between disabled and non-disabled students.

Professor Sarah Greer, Vice-Chancellor, University of Winchester



Professor Sarah Greer is the Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Winchester, and was previously Deputy Vice Chancellor and Provost of the University of Worcester.

After qualifying as a Chartered Accountant, Sarah retrained and practised as a barrister, completing pupillage with the Treasury Solicitor. She has held a range of academic and leadership positions and has taught undergraduate and postgraduate law students for many years. She has seen at first hand the challenges that disabled students can encounter in higher education. In 2011 she was appointed a National

Teaching Fellow of the Higher Education Academy for her inspirational teaching.

Sarah has held public appointments in England and Wales. She has been an independent legal panel member for the Solicitors Regulation Authority and a voluntary chair and panel member for England Netball disciplinary and appeals panels.

Sarah believes that the Disabled Students' Commission, working across boundaries with providers, regulators and government, will bring a new and independent approach to ensuring that disabled students succeed and flourish in higher education. She hopes that the Commissioners can identify the excellent practice that already exists in the sector and share and develop it to embed it more consistently and effectively across all higher education providers. She hopes that the Disabled Students' Commission will challenge the sector in a very constructive way to use its creativity and commitment to its students to ensure that disabled students aspire to and succeed in reaching their highest potential.

Patrick Johnson, Head of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Law



Patrick Johnson became Director of EDI at the University of Law in January 2021. He was previously Head of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Manchester for 13 years.

His role includes the development of EDI strategy, ensuring that the EDI agenda is inherently considered at the university in everything that they do.

Patrick is currently a member of several national and local committees where diversity and inclusion are important. These include:

- + Trustee, Chatsworth Multi-Academy Trust - a specialist school and organisation for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities
- + Deputy Chair, Equality and Diversity Advisory Panel (EDAP), Research Excellence Framework 2021 – Research England
- + Advisor, Diversity and Inclusion Steering Group, Wellcome Trust – an independent global charitable foundation.

Patrick also has over 16 years' experience in the field of careers information, advice and guidance. He has worked at the University of Manchester's Careers Service as Head of Pre-entry and Diversity. This role involved working with major graduate employers to develop 'Positive Action' initiatives such as mentoring and internships targeted at disabled and BAME students, to help increase their employability.

Patrick's hope is that the Commission will continually challenge the sector on how well they are supporting disabled students, into, through and beyond higher education. He says he will take his responsibility as a Commissioner seriously, with a key aim of seeking to achieve more positive outcomes for disabled students.

Professor Deborah Johnston, Pro-Vice Chancellor (Education) London South Bank University



Professor Deborah Johnston is a development economist. When appointed to the DSC, she was the Pro-Director (Learning and Teaching), SOAS University of London, a role she held for over four years. In April 2020, she was appointed as PVC Education at London South Bank University.

Deborah completed an undergraduate degree in Economics and an Mphil in the Economics and Politics of Development at Queens' College Cambridge. She completed a PhD in Economics in 1997 from SOAS

University of London and has split her career across academia, charities and government.

Her academic work has focused on inequality and poverty. She is a person who stammers and has worked closely with both the 'British Stammering Association' and the 'Stammering Through University Consultancy' to ensure greater awareness of the needs of students who stammer. Her work at SOAS also involved a close partnership with the Students Union to eliminate the Racial Awarding Gap and she was the institutional champion for SOAS's work supporting access and success for all students. Deborah obtained Principal Fellowship of HEA in 2019.

She looks forward to supporting the DSC's agenda, helping to create an environment where all students are supported to flourish. The DSC provides the opportunity to look at the range of students that identify as disabled and supporting success for both undergraduate and postgraduate study.

Dr Sam Parrett OBE, London and South East Education Group



Dr Sam Parrett CBE is an experienced CEO and Principal whose drive and determination to improve education across London and the south east has resulted in the expansion of high-quality pathways and outcomes for learners.

Sam was appointed principal of Bromley College in 2010, overseeing a merger with Orpington College the following year. In 2016, she led the country's first three-way College merger, bringing together Bromley College, Bexley College and Greenwich Community College to form London South East Colleges. Sam also established a successful Multi

Academy Trust in 2013 – London South East Academies Trust - which now includes seven alternative provision and special schools and one mainstream school across Bromley, Bexley and most recently, Surrey.

The unique structure of this education group provides children and young people, many with a range of special educational needs and disabilities, with high quality provision and care from birth right through to 25 and beyond.

Sam is passionate about ensuring disabled students can progress easily through FE and into Higher Education – enabling them to achieve their career goals and ambitions.

This year Sam was awarded a CBE for Services to Education, building on the OBE she was presented with in 2016 for Services to Further Education.

In addition to her role with the DSC, Sam currently sits on the boards of the Association of Colleges and the ETF and is an elected member of the CBI London Council. She is a designated National Leader of Further Education and a fellow of the CIPD, RSA and the Chartered Institution of Further Education.

Piers Wilkinson, Digital Accessibility and Inclusion Consultant



Piers Wilkinson currently supports Diversity and Ability (D&A), a disabled led social enterprise, as their Higher Education Policy and Partnerships Lead and was the last NUS Disabled Students' Officer before the role was defunded in July of 2020. Piers has been deeply involved in representing disabled students for over seven years, culminating in their election to national representative positions during the last five years.

Piers was appointed to the commission as a Student Voice Commissioner and previously studied an undergraduate

MSci in Physical Oceanography at Bangor University. They also worked as an access consultant specialising in inclusive design within education, digital accessibility, user design learning, and inclusive campaigns.

Projects Piers has previously worked on includes the 2016 UNCRPD inquiry, the Arriving at Thriving report on disabled student experiences, and providing expert advice on collaborative projects such as Student Minds' Mental Health Charter, and the 2019 Phase-out of Plastic Pollution Bill.

As a Student Voice Commissioner, ensuring the lived experience of disabled students shapes and supports the decisions made about disabled students is a key priority of Piers'. They are hoping the Disabled Students Commission increases the adoption and integration of the principles of the social model, champions the importance of lived experience, and creates an environment of progress towards holistic inclusion. Piers believes disabled students deserve equitable access to the entire experience of education and believes the commission will help achieve that equity - from quality provision of DSA, to extracurricular opportunities.

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